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ABSTRACT

A perspective on quality in higher education suggests that standards and assumptions about quality that have been traditionally accepted for upper level colleges are not applicable to community colleges. It is proposed that quality standards be established for community colleges to reflect their unique mission and goals. The most distinctive characteristic of the community college movement has been the absence of admission standards. It is suggested that this policy has provided access to higher education for all Americans, and has been the primary contributing factor to charges of low quality at community colleges. Research has indicated that selectivity in admissions is highly correlated with reputation for quality in higher education. It is noted that lack of admissions standards does not indicate a lack of concern about exit standards. The community college's comprehensiveness in academic offerings and the student-centered focus on teaching have also been criticized. Views that quality is linked to either specialization, an emphasis on research, prestige, or physical facilities are questioned, and it is proposed that there is a need to recognize that quality is rather a continuing process of critical self-examination that focuses on the institution's contribution to the student's intellectual and personal development. Student-centeredness, a focus on teaching, and responsiveness to change are characteristic of the community college and are part of the new view of quality for higher education. It is emphasized that the students and missions of community colleges are different than those of upper level colleges and that quality standards need to be somewhat different as well. (SW)

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QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSPECTIVE

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QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSPECTIVE

Presentation To Fourth Annual Advanced
Leadership Seminar For State Academic Officers

Bill J. Priest

It's reassuring to see that the exalted topic for this meeting — quality in higher education — is leavened with a hefty measure of that critical ingredient - perspective. No number of seminars, not even a plethora of research investigations will define, once and for all, what quality in higher education "really" is. This is not to imply that we do not know what quality is, nor that we cannot evaluate it. I simply state a fact: quality in higher education, just like quality in anything else, is largely a judgment call. And, we make that call based on some deep-seated (and often hidden) criteria that reflect our own relatively narrow perspectives. While a parochial view is accepted from an institutional leader, state academic officers are confronted with the compelling need to consider the various institutional perspectives and to translate them into a vista encompassing all of higher education.

For those with institutional axes to grind (or views to share, if one is more charitable), it is critical that our institution's message on quality come through loud and clear. Research university, comprehensive college, liberal arts college, technical school, and community college — all want to be sure that their voices are heard at the state level. And each wants to assure that the quality of its programs will not be judged by a set of criteria that applies to some other kind of institution.

Community colleges have probably been too comfortable about the self-evidence of our mission and its implied quality criteria. For too long, we've assumed that our various constituencies "understood" that we were a separate entity within higher education, with distinct purpose and ideology. The truth is, we've been wrong. Our constituencies have <u>not</u> understood, and we've taken some "poor quality" raps in consequence. As Hegel says, "Hell is truth seen too late." Our particular

"HELL" HAS TAKEN MANY FORMS, AND I'D LIKE TO SHARE A FEW. A 1979 FRONT-PAGE STORY IN THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION LISTED COMMUNITY COLLEGES AS BEING AMONG THE PROBABLE CAUSES OF THE DECLINE OF EDUCATIONAL QUALITY DURING THE LAST DECADE. THE RECENT CARNEGIE REPORT ENTITLED THREE THOUSAND FUTURES SAYS THAT "EACH INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD HAVE AS ITS GOAL FOR THE YEAR 2000 A RETURN TO THE ACADEMIC QUALITY LEVEL OF 1960 IN THE ACHIEVEMENT CAPACITIES OF ITS GRADUATES." 1960 THUS MARKS THE BEGINNING OF THE "BOOM ERA" FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND THE START OF ACADEMIC DECLINE. FOR MORE THAN HALF OF THE NATION'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES, A RETURN TO THEIR "STANDARDS OF 1960" WOULD BE A MOVE TO NO STANDARDS AT ALL, BECAUSE THEY WERE NOT YET IN EXISTENCE. THIS GIG MIGHT BE A SUBTLE ONE, BUT IT'S THERE NONETHELESS. IN TEXAS, A FORMER UNIVERSITY REGENT AND INTIMATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SEEKING TO ILLUSTRATE THE POOR QUALITY OF CERTAIN SENIOR INSTITUTIONS IN OUR STATE, REFERRED TO THEM AS "JUST SORT OF HIGH GRADE JUNIOR COLLEGES." I CRIED "FOUL" RIGHT AWAY, BUT WIDE MEDIA COVERAGE OF SUCH NONSENSE DOES DAMAGE TO THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IMAGE THAT IS NOT UNDONE WITH IRATE MISSIVES SUCH AS MINE.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE THE SINGLE LARGEST SEGMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION. MORE THAN ONE-THIRD OF OUR NATION'S HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS ARE PUBLIC COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY COLLEGES. OVER 35% OF ALL STUDENTS ENROLLED IN HIGHER EDUCATION ARE STUDYING IN PUBLIC COMMUNITY COLLEGES — A PERCENTAGE WHICH HAS NEARLY TRIPLED SINCE 1960 AND WHICH REPRESENTS THE LARGEST SINGLE SEGMENT OF ENROLLEES. AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES CONTINUE TO BE THE FASTEST-GROWING SEGMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION, WITH THE MOST OPTIMISTIC FUTURE IN THE FACE OF DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINES. THE DALLAS COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT, WHICH OPENED ITS DOORS IN 1966, IS TODAY SECOND IN SIZE ONLY TO THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN. AND WE SURPASSED UT SEVERAL YEARS AGO IN UNDERGRADUATES. THESE FACTS ARE NOT PROVIDED TO SUGGEST THAT QUANTITY EQUALS QUALITY AND THEREFORE THAT COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE SUPERIOR, BECAUSE THAT AIN'T NECESSARILY SO. BUT, I'M A FIRM BELIEVER IN JUDGING PERFORMANCE OF AN INDIVIDUAL OR AN

INSTITUTION ON "HOW'D YOU COME OUT?" AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE COMING OUT AHEAD.

CRITICS HAVE ATTRIBUTED THE SUCCESS OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE MOVEMENT TO ITS LOW STANDARDS AND POOR QUALITY. THEIR DEFINITIONS FOR "STANDARDS" AND "QUALITY" HAVE BEEN BORROWED WHOLE-HOG FROM OUR SENIOR SISTER INSTITUTIONS. COMMUNITY COLLEGES HAVE A RELATIVELY SHORT HISTORY IN THE ANNALS OF HIGHER EDUCATION, AND THERE HAS BEEN LITTLE TIME FOR NEW OR DIFFERENT STANDARDS OF QUALITY TO INVADE THE COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS. THERE'S NO ARGUING THE POINT THAT COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE LARGELY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEMOCRATIZATION AND CONSEQUENT MASSIFICATION OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION. AND THUS A MONUMENTAL SOCIAL CHANGE HAS BEEN EFFECTED IN A VERY SHORT TIME. BUT THE RESULTANT UPHEAVAL AND DISCOMFORT REGARDING "QUALITY" IS COMPARABLE IN SOME RESPECTS TO MASS INDUSTRIALIZATION. TO THE PRESENT DAY, SOME SEE THE ASSEMBLY LINE AND OTHER ACCOUNTRMENTS OF MASS INDUSTRY AS HERALDING THE INCIPIENT DECLINE IN QUALITY OF GOODS PRODUCED, JUST AS THE RISE OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS ALLEGED BY SOME TO MARK THE END OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION. THIS ANALOGY CAN BE CARRIED TOO FAR, OF COURSE, BUT IT MAKES THE POINT THAT COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE NOT JUST A VARIATION OF THE TRADITIONAL IN HIGHER EDUCATION. THEY REPRESENT A DIFFERENT BREED OF CAT, AND THE QUALITY STANDARDS ESTABLISHED BY AND FOR THEM SHOULD REFLECT THEIR UNIQUE MISSION AND GOALS.

UNDOUBTEDLY THE SINGLE MOST DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTIC OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE MOVEMENT HAS BEEN THE ABSENCE OF ADMISSION STANDARDS, THE NOW WELL-KNOWN "OPEN DOOR". THIS POLICY HAS PROVIDED ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR ALL AMERICANS, AND HAS BEEN THE PRIMARY CONTRIBUTING FACTOR TO CHARGES OF "LOW QUALITY." STUDY AFTER STUDY HAS SHOWN THAT SELECTIVITY IN ADMISSIONS IS HIGHLY CORRELATED WITH <u>REPUTATION FOR QUALITY</u> IN HIGHER

EDUCATION. ADMISSIONS SELECTIVITY IS USUALLY A GOOD INDICATOR OF INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES, TOO. LARGE ENDOWMENTS, PRESTIGIOUS FACULTIES, WELL-STOCKED LIBRARIES — ALL ARE SEEN AS INDICATORS OF QUALITY, AND ALL ARE ASSOCIATED WITH SELECTIVE ADMISSIONS. AND THERE'S ANOTHER KICKER IN THE TRADITIONAL QUALITY GAME FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES: THE POPULAR "EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES" APPROACH. JUDGING QUALITY BASED ON PRODUCTS SOUNDS GOOD UNTIL YOU REALIZE THAT MOST OUTPUT MEASURES DEPEND FAR MORE ON THE QUALITY OF THE STUDENTS ADMITTED THAN ON ANY DIFFERENCE THAT THE COLLEGE HAS BEEN ABLE TO MAKE. SO, WE'RE BACK TO SELECTIVE ADMISSIONS AS THE QUALITY INDICATOR THAT IS MOST RECOGNIZED AND MOST USED, CONSCIOUSLY OR UNCONSCIOUSLY, BY MOST PEOPLE, WHETHER PROFESSIONAL OR LAY PERSONS. AND THE OPEN-DOOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE, HARBINGER OF SOCIAL CHANGE AND DEMOCRATIZER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, IS OUT IN THE COLD, JUDGED "GUILTY" ON CHARGES OF POOR QUALITY WITHOUT A TRIAL, ON THE CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE OF NON-SELECTIVE ADMISSIONS. IT'S AS THOUGH THE LACK OF ADMISSIONS STANDARDS IMPLIES A LACK OF CONCERN ABOUT EXIT STANDARDS AS WELL. AND THAT SIMPLY DOESN'T FOLLOW.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES HAVE SOME OTHER COMMON CHARACTERISTICS THAT FLY IN THE FACE OF TRADITIONAL QUALITY MEASURES. THEIR VERY COMPREHENSIVENESS IS A PROBLEM FOR SOME CRITICS. THEY QUESTION WHETHER AN INSTITUTION COULD POSSIBLY PROVIDE HIGH QUALITY IN ACADEMIC TRANSFER PROGRAMS, TECHNICAL OCCUPATIONAL PROGRAMS, NON-CREDIT COURSES, CULTURAL EVENTS, AND COMMUNITY SERVICE. THE MYTH HERE, OF COURSE, IS THAT SPECIALIZATION EQUATES TO QUALITY. ANOTHER QUALITY BUGABOO FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES IS THEIR "STUDENT-CENTERED" FOCUS ON TEACHING. WHY A CONCENTRATION ON <u>TEACHING</u> -- <u>EXCELLENCE</u> SHOULD RESULT IN A BAD RAP FOR EDUCATIONAL QUALITY IS A MYSTERY. YET, THOSE OF US EHO'VE BEEN KICKING AROUND HIGHER EDUCATION KNOW THAT IT'S AN EMPHASIS ON RESEARCH THAT GENERATES A REPUTATION FOR QUALITY. AND A

RESEARCH INSTITUTION IS ONE THING THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE HAS NEVER CLAIMED TO BE. ANOTHER CHARACTERISTIC OF A "QUALITY" REPUTATION IS TRADITION -- AND THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS ADMITTEDLY LOW ON THAT COMMODITY. WE'VE PRIDED OURSELVES ON RESPONSIVENESS TO CHANGING NEEDS, AND HAVE BEEN CHIDED BY THE "QUALITY" BUFFS FOR BEING WILL-OF-THE WISPS, BLOWN ABOUT BY EVERY PASSING FANCY. THE AGONIES EXPERIENCED DURING THE 1960'S AND 1970'S BY MANY UNIVERSITIES WHEN THEY WERE COMPELLED, FIRST BY PHYSICAL FORCE, AND LATER BY ECONOMIC PRESSURES TO ABANDON THEIR ALOOFNESS FRM THOSE BEING SERVED, WAS OF GREAT INTEREST TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSONNEL. SOME MIGHT EVEN SAY THEY CAME OFF THEIR PEDESTALS FOR THE WRONG REASONS. AND ONE COULD EVEN ARGUE THAT THEIR PHILOSOPHY AND CONVICTIONS MIGHT HAVE BEEN LEGITIMATE AND SHOULD HAVE BEEN DEFENDED MORE VIGOROUSLY IF THE BASIC POSITION WAS CORRECT IN THE FIRST PLACE.

THE COUP DE GRACE FOR A REPUTATION OF EDUCATION QUALITY IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE COMES FROM THE VERY FACT THAT IT IS COMMUNITY-BASED. AND EVERY CRITIC KNOWS THAT IF IT'S IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD, IT CAN'T BE ALL THAT HOT. I'VE NEVER PURSUED MY THEORY THAT THE REPUTED QUALITY OF AN INSTITUTION INCREASED IN DIRECT CORRELATION TO THE DISTANCE BY WHICH ITS ENROLLEES ARE REMOVED FROM IT, BUT I THINK IT'S WORTH LOOKING INTO. THE VERY NATURE OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS THUS COUNTER TO SOME OF OUR BEST-LOVED AND MOST REPEATED MYTHS ABOUT QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION. I AM SOMEWHAT ENCOURAGED THAT THE MYTHS ARE BEGINNING TO CHANGE, ALTHOUGH THE MOTIVATION FOR SOME OF THE CHANGES IS OPEN TO QUESTION. SOME REMARKS SANDY ASTIN MADE TO A LARGELY SENIOR COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY AUDIENCE AT AHE ILLUSTRATE THE EMERGING "NEW VIEW" OF QUALITY: ASTIN SAYS, "A 'HIGH QUALITY' INSTITUTION IS ONE THAT KNOWS WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ITS STUDENTS AND ONE THAT GIVES FACULTY CLEAR-CUT OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP THEIR TEACHING SKILLS...QUALITY IS EQUATED HERE NOT WITH PRESTIGE OR PHYSICAL FACILITIES, BUT RATHER WITH A CONTINUING PROCESS OF CRITICAL SELF-EXAMINATION THAT FOCUSES ON THE INSTITUTION'S

CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDENT'S INTELLECTUAL AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT." SHADES OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE MISSION STATEMENTS! STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS, FOCUS ON TEACHING, RESPONSIVENESS TO CHANGE -- ALL CHARACTERISTIC OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND ALL PART OF THE "NEW VIEW" OF QUALITY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION. THERE IS METHOD TO THIS MADNESS OF MYTH DESTRUCTION, AND THE TEXT IS TAKEN DIRECTLY FROM THE GLOOMY DEMOGRAPHIC FORECASTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: THE HIGHLY SELECTIVE, TRADITIONALLY "QUALITY" INSTITUTIONS MUST DEVELOP SOME CHANGING VIEWS OF QUALITY TO SURVIVE IN THE FACE OF SHRINKING STUDENT POPULATIONS. THE CHANGING DEFINITION OF QUALITY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REPRESENTS LITTLE CHANGE WHATSOEVER FOR THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE. BUT IT REPRESENTS A SIGNIFICANT CHANGE FOR THE SENIOR INSTITUTIONS. IN POINT OF FACT, THE TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITY VIEW HAS BEEN DISCIPLINE-CENTERED, PROFESSOR-CENTERED, RESEARCH-CENTERED -- ANYTHING <u>EXCEPT</u> STUDENT CENTERED. ASTIN SPELLS OUT BOTH ALTRUISTIC AND SELF-SERVING REASONS FOR THIS REDEFINITION OF QUALITY. NOTING THAT TEACHING SKILLS MAY BE ONE OF THE MOST UNDERDEVELOPED RESOURCES OF THE SENIOR INSTITUTIONS, HE SAYS, AND AGAIN I QUOTE - "CONCENTRATING MORE OF OUR ENERGIES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THESE SKILLS COULD PROVE TO BE ONE OF THE MOST PRODUCTIVE AND <u>SELF-PROTECTIVE</u> ACTIVITIES THAT INSTITUTIONS CAN ENGAGE IN FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS. IF THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND OF STUDENT ADVISING IMPROVES SIGNIFICANTLY, THEN THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD INCREASE AS WELL." HE ADDS THAT THESE EFFORTS SHOULD ALSO ATTRACT MORE STUDENTS AND INCREASE RETENTION. I APPLAUD WHAT APPEARS TO BE A MOVE TO EMPHASIS ON STUDENTS AND IMPROVED TEACHING IN THE SENIOR INSTITUTIONS, AND I HEARTILY CONCUR WITH MR. ASTIN'S "NEW VIEW" OF QUALITY. BUT ONE HAS ONLY TO STUDY THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE BRIEFLY TO SEE THAT ITS THE VIEW WE'VE HAD ALL ALONG.

MAKE NO MISTAKE: I'M NOT TROUBLED BY THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE NOISES THAT HIGHER EDUCATION IS MAKING. IN FACT, I WELCOME THEM, BECAUSE THEY ARE FOUNDED UPON A DEMOCRATIC PREMISE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION WHICH I

WHOLEHEARTEDLY ESPOUSE. BUT, I WOULD CLOSE WITH SOME WORDS OF CAUTION ABOUT THE "QUALITY" PHENOMENON. COMMUNITY COLLEGES HAVE HAD QUALITY CONTROL OF UNIMPEACHABLE INTEGRITY IN THE FORM OF THE SENIOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES THEMSELVES. THE CONFORMITY OF OUR ACADEMIC EXIT STANDARDS TO THEIR ENTRANCE STANDARDS HAS BEEN AN IMPERATIVE. AND A SIMILAR CHECKPOINT HAS BEEN AVAILABLE FOR THE QUALITY OF OUR TECHNICAL OCCUPATIONAL GRADUATES THROUGH THEIR EMPLOYERS. BELIEVE ME, WORD GETS AROUND FAST WHEN YOU TURN OUT VOCATIONAL GRADS WHO EITHER CANNOT GET JOBS OR CANNOT KEEP THEM. SO THERE HAS BEEN A NATURAL SYSTEM FOR ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE. AS STATE ACADEMIC OFFICERS IN THE 1980'S, YOU WILL BE BOMBARDED BY TOUGH QUESTIONS FROM LEGISLATORS, BOARD MEMBERS, AND COLLEGE REPRESENTATIVES, BECAUSE YOUR ROLE IN PROGRAM REVIEW AND APPROVAL PROVIDES SOME BENCHMARK FOR CHANGING QUALITY STANDARDS. IT IS EASY FOR COLLEGE LEADERS TO TAKE THE SHORT VIEW — EVEN THE SELF-SERVING VIEW — WHEN CONFRONTED WITH THE CHANGES THAT THE 1980'S WILL BRING. BUT STATE OFFICERS MUST BE MORE THAN THE GUARDIANS OF STATE EDUCATIONAL SPENDING IF WE ARE TO WORK TOGETHER TO PRESERVE QUALITY. ON THE ONE HAND, NEEDLESS AND SELF-SERVING PROGRAM EXPANSION MUST BE CURBED. ON THE OTHER, THE STATES MUST ENCOURAGE THE INNOVATIONS THAT THE FUTURE WILL REQUIRE. FOR EXAMPLE, TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES ARE VERY MUCH WITH US, AND IT WILL BE SELF-DEFEATING TO DENY THAT DISTANCE LEARNING (THROUGH TV AND RADIO) IS A LEGITIMATE METHODOLOGY. WE'LL ALL LOOK STUPID IF WE STAND PAT, DENYING THE UNDENIABLE, AND WAITING FOR SOME OTHER, LESS DESIRABLE SET OF OVERSEERS TO COME IN AND FILL THE VACUUM. PERHAPS YOU CAN HELP US TO TAKE THE LONG VIEW, THE VIEW THAT CONSIDERS QUALITY IN ALL ITS DIVERSE GUISES. OUR STUDENTS ARE DIFFERENT, OUR MISSIONS ARE DIFFERENT, AND IT FOLLOWS THAT OUR QUALITY STANDARDS WILL BE SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT AS WELL. BY RECOGNIZING AND EMBRACING

THIS DIVERSITY, WE CAN BUILD A STRONGER AND BETTER SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR ALL AMERICANS.